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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an innovative course in educational administration and presents students' reactions to the experience. The class was based on the constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the individual's construction of reality through dialogue, observation, writing, and reflection. The class was organized to focus students on the purpose and meaning of schooling and administration, utilizing the concept of the classrooms as microworlds, or "communities of inquiry." The course, which was based on self-directed learning and critical thinking to encourage students to take risks in a safe environment, used student teams to design "new concept" schools. Feedback from students was very positive; they requested that they be allowed to remain together as a cohort throughout their masters' degree program. However, the department was unwilling to accommodate the change. (LMI)

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CONSTRUCTIVISM, MICROWORLDS, AND CURRICULAR INNOVATION IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

University Council for Educational Administration
Convention 1993

**Conversations About Leading and Learning:
Linking Schools and Communities**

Session 13.4 The Experience of Innovation: The Rewards and Sanctions of Restructuring Student Experience in Educational Administration Classes.

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Outline of the Conversation Session

I. The Context of the Innovation

A. Changes in Department Level Programs/Courses

II. The Innovation

A. The Course: Educational Administration 800

1. Course Design
2. Focus on Students
3. Role of the Professors

III. The Results of the Innovation

A. Rewards

B. Sanctions

IV. Conversations

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Executive Summary

During the past several years faculty of the Department of Educational Administration had worked to redesign the preparation program for students who wished to pursue studies in school administration. The Masters degree program was anchored by two Summer classes that were arranged in large blocks of time. EDAD 800, the beginning Masters block, was targeted for reconfiguration from a nine credit hour block to a six credit hour block. During the first semester of 1992-93, two faculty members were appointed to redesign the experience and have it ready for the Summer of 1993.

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The course was constructed to focus on the student's ability to conceptually design a school and to demonstrate through that design, the type of leadership the principal would provide and how the school would meet the needs of students. The intent of the instructors was to empower students to focus on the meaning, purpose, and function of a school. All traditional obstacles to learning were removed; the final grade was assumed to be an "A" unless the instructors observation of student work indicated low productivity or lack of effort, research papers were replaced with a continuous feedback on the developing research base for the final project, adult learners were assembeled in learning teams, and there was a continuous process of evaluating the team and individual learning through the use of journals, mid-term assessments, and team meetings (or individual meetings with students if necessary).

The team learning formatwas selected because of the instructors' conviction that teaching and school leadership in the future must be conducted in a collaborative manner. This conviction was influenced by Senge's (1990) concept of the learning community; a team of dedicated individuals who share their individual expertise in an effort to continuously position the organization for success.

Feedback from students was very positive. The "new schools", nine in all, designed by the learning teams required team members to access and use immense amounts of data from a broad research base. Students reported reading more than at any previous time they could recall. Teaming was a success as students discovered they could contribute their personal expertise to the team.and that their limitations were usually covered by the expertise of another team member. Students reported discovering or rediscovering their sense of purpose as educators. Students submitted a written request to the Department Chairs requesting to stay together as a cohort group throughout their Masters Degree program and to continue the learning mode of EDAD 800.

The sense of accomplishment experienced by students and their positive class experiences continued to be relayed to the Department Chair and College Dean. Other members of the department asked questions about or commented on the course. The course was featured at a meeting with colleagues from another campus in the university system; they were complimentary of the efforts. However, after that event it became apparent that "not all was well in Mudville." Whenever the class was mentioned, at meetings with practitioners or in departmental meetings, the body language or side talk indicated that some members of the faculty were growing uncomforatable talking about it. It is no longer a topic that we wish to discuss at faculty meetings although we feel free to raise question or respond to questions of others in informal settings.

Some of the questions raised by this experience are:

1. How can the success of a course or several courses be made to be the success of the department?

2. When a non-traditional teaching technique is successful, how can it

become part of the of the departmental culture?

3. When students want to re-arrange their programs to include more non traditional expereinces, how can a department respond without upsetting more acceptable formats?

4. Will faculty who want to innovate become discouraged by the system as it is or will they persist in introducing changes?

CONSTRUCTIVISM, MICROWORLDS, AND CURRICULAR INNOVATION IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

by

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Abstract

Improvements in university programs for the preparation of educational administrators feature greater attention to the unique characteristics of the adult learner and course designs that merge theory and practice. This paper describes an innovative class in educational administration and the reactions of adult students to this experience. The class was organized to focus students on the purpose and meaning of schooling and administration. Students designed "new concepts schools" and provided dialogue and evidence to support their innovative designs. Students used prior experience and new knowledge to construct their designs. The construct of the microworld (Senge, 1990; Pappert, 1980) was used as a philosophical base for the course and is described in this paper.

CONSTRUCTIVISM, MICROWORLDS, AND CURRICULAR INNOVATION IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

In recent years there have been many calls to improve the preparation programs offered by departments of educational administration. These concerns from the field are well catalogued in The Landscape of Leadership Preparation by Joseph Murphy (1992). What is not attempted in Murphy's analysis is a description of how professors of educational administration have responded to the calls for change and innovation. Have educational administration professors reacted to the calls for reform by creating different programs, course, or experiences for the adult professionals in their programs?

Prototypes for new learning and new programs in educational administration exist. For example, problem based learning (Bridges, 1993) has captured the attention of many as one possible curricular innovation. The UCEA initiated Information Environment for School Leader Preparation is another proposed innovation, an effort to create a large data base that will permit students to problem solve administrative problems (UCEA Review, 1993). New innovative preparation programs have been operating at Lewis and Clark College (Schmuck, 1992), at Miami University (McCabe, 1993), and at Duquesne University (1993). These are all examples of what Senge (1990) calls prototypes, trial ideas that must be tried out before they are to be implemented in any widespread fashion.

Based on the recent criticisms of educational administration, innovation is likely

to be occurring in five areas: 1) the knowledge base, 2) program offerings, 3) orientation toward practitioners, 4) conceptions of administration and management, and 5) pedagogy. Of the innovations in these five areas, that which is most likely to occupy attention in the near future is innovation in pedagogy. This is because educational administration is attracting a different clientele consisting of older mid career women and men. These students require a different pedagogical approach (Bryant, 1989-90). There is also a growing interest within the larger education community in alternative approaches to the acquisition of knowledge (Condon, et. al, 1993; Reilly, 1989; Shulman, 1987). Constructivism, as contrasted with experimentalism or objectivism, is a label that captures a shifting pedagogical orientation.

This paper provides an example of a constructivist educational administration class using the language of students to capture the experience as students understood it.

Constructivism and the Classroom Environment of the Microworld

Jonassen (1991) distinguished between constructivism and the more common pedagogical orientation which she labeled objectivism. Programs with this objectivist orientation tend to have clearly defined behavioral objectives, a relatively well sequenced series of courses for the transmission of requisite knowledge and skills (Jonassen, 1991). Attention to the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of students is not central to the pedagogical orientation.

In contrast, a constructivist orientation emphasizes the individual's creation or

construction of reality through a heavy reliance on dialogue, observation, writing, and reflection. Prior attitudes, beliefs, and experiences are critical (Jonassen, 1991).

Classes that are organized about a constructivist approach will come in many shapes. But there will be some common principles. Such classes are likely to be what Pappert and Senge refer to as microworlds or what Sexias referred to as communities of inquiry (Sexias, 1993). Microworlds are places where students can safely learn about and play with reality (Senge, 1990). They are microcosms of reality (Senge, 1990). They are learning environments in which time and space are compressed so that it becomes possible to experiment and to learn; the consequences of decisions are distant and nonthreatening (Senge, 1990). Arie de Geus refers to the microworld as a place for relevant play (de Geus, in Senge,1989).

Building this microworld concept into classroom learning is compatible with cooperative learning theory, adult learning theory, teaming, and constructivist approaches that interpret learning as a communal activity carried on within a shared cultural context (Sexias, 1993). When classrooms are organized as microworlds, learning occurs differently than in the more traditionally organized classes. And this learning in the microworld offers yet another prototype to professors in the field who are looking for alternative approaches to teaching. What follows is a description of the class and then commentary from students.

The Class

The class was the beginning Masters Block in Educational Administration, Schooling and Administration, a six credit hour, five week Summer experience

designed to acquaint students with the complexities of building level leadership. Class members ranged in age from 25 to 61 years, were involved in both public and private, K-12 or alternative school settings. Of the forty-five students in the class, several held quasi-administrative assignments, however, they were not certificated as educational administrators. Classes met Monday through Thursday from 8:30 A.M. until 3:30 P.M. A one hour lunch break provided the opportunity for class members to eat together, engage in recreational activities, or continue to meet as work-groups. Friday meetings were optional; generally reserved for additional work the teams needed to complete or for time to reflect about progress made during the week. Instructors were available to students, as individuals or teams, Monday through Friday.

Class members were organized into nine teams of 5 members each after instructors gathered feedback from an interest inventory completed by students. For the most part, team members were not previously acquainted. In one case, however, three individuals who wanted to design a foreign language immersion school requested placement together and asked the instructors to identify any additional students who shared their interest.

The idea of using teams was selected because of the instructors conviction that teaching and school leadership in the future must be conducted in a collaborative manner. This conviction was influenced by Senge's (1990) concept of the learning community; a team of dedicated individuals who share their individual expertise in an effort to continuously position the organization for success.

The class was non-competitive; all students were promised A grades unless the

instructors had concerns about performance. Significant portions of the class time were allocated to team building and process and reflection. The instructors intended to make the course information rich, so rich that students would be forced to develop mechanisms for sharing information. This was done through seminars in which many discussion leaders external to the class led discussions about selected aspects of education. It was done through a series of lectures and panel discussions as well. It was a course theme to listen and postpone judgment about people's ideas. It was a course theme to ask questions, particularly "what if" or "what about" kinds of questions.

In order to capture the perceived difference, the instructors asked students to respond to a series of open ended questions. Students also provided insight into what they were experiencing though journaling and through written comments in response to specific questions.

The Project

The class was designed to focus on the student's ability to design a school conceptually and on the student's own intellectual growth as an educator. The instructors asked each student to focus on the meaning, purpose, and function of school and to be open to different understandings of those purposes and functions. In the early stages of the course they were to gather information widely. In the later stages of the course they were asked to synthesize this information in a cooperative design. They were asked to provide evidence in support of their school design in the form of research reports, evaluations, and artifacts for the major features of their school and to share some salient aspect of their design in a final demonstration before the

class and an external audience.

Relationship to Consumers

The instructors solicited enrollment by creating a brochure describing the course. Approximately one month prior to the beginning of the class, a Saturday afternoon orientation session was conducted for students who had already registered or were thinking about registering for the class. The class design and the project were explained and several readings were distributed to assist students with preparation for the first day of class. The orientation session served as an initial introduction for students and instructors and opened the communication process prior to the official beginning of the class. It served to remove any intrepidation on the part of students and allowed them to begin to think about the project.

Self-Directed Learning

The instructors were interested in whether or not students felt that they were able to direct their own learning. This capacity is key to constructivist theories of learning and is very much a part of learning in a microworld. Professors asked: "Did you feel you were able to direct your own learning and, if so, would you give us some examples." Students responded to this request. One wrote;

> "Definitely, the most obvious are the choices I was able to make. I selected the concepts to explore, the readings to study. Another example is found in our group project. This opportunity allowed me (us) to direct ourselves through the research and development and decision-making. This self-direction was

supported by the non-competitive approach."

Another student commented about the security offered by the class design and what that meant to adult learners;

> "We have been given the safety of knowing our class grade of an A is assured as long as we do what we have been asked to do. We have been blessed knowing that the process is going to be more important than the product. Given the aforementioned securities, I feel no one will do less than they can do at this particular time in their lives."

Testing Reality

Another aspect of the microworld is to think critically, to test reality. It is difficult to design a course that accomplishes this independent of students, i.e. when critical thinking occurs it is as likely to be there because of the talents of the students and not because of the structure or content of a class. Student comments in response to this question, "did you feel you were encouraged to think critically?" are presented below:

> "This course is rooted in critical thinking. The instructors removed roadblocks typically prohibiting critical thinking. They accomplished this by refraining from giving answers and encouraging us to discover and create answers. With our multiple answers, we were free to evaluate the merit of these possibilities. The journaling was an excellent way to reflectively critique our own perspectives as well as those presented in class."

> "Yes, in the fact that whatever I thought wasn't considered wrong. I think by

allowing this freedom, it helped me to think more critically."

"We were exposed to a variety of ideas, techniques, and other data without expectations. I used critical thinking to sort through and decide about the quality of information which related to our plan."

"Not once were we asked to consume some material and then regurgitate it. We were given an enormous amount of information and then told to do with it whatever we thought appropriate."

In the course, the attempt was made to provide students with a great deal of information. How to use that information was very much up to them. Thus, no particular viewpoint about any aspect of education was endorsed or supported by the instructors initially. The attempt was made to avoid giving any clues about preferred information or beliefs. A principle of the instructors was to postpone judgments until they were requested. One student captured the consequences of this part of the class. "There were times at night I couldn't get to sleep because the wheels in my mind were spinning. If there is one thing I did in this class, it was think a lot."

A Safe Climate

In a microworld, the climate is non-threatening, safe, and fun. This requires suspension of judgement. Judgement is similar to external evaluation and it is an

impediment to creativity (Amabile, 1983; Bryant, 1988). In this course there were some characteristics that the instructors hoped would achieve such a climate. Each class began with a morning meeting in which a class member, shared some thought about learning and education. A poem, an excerpt from a book, some experience--these were the focus of most morning meetings. It was a powerful experience that permitted class members to become known as individuals very quickly. All students were promised A grades unless there appeared to be a problem at which time the problem would be dealt with individually. A journal was required and each instructor read each journal and responded to it in writing. A project challenge experience (a ropes course) was used part way through the first week as a trust building activity. These were some of the aspects of the course that were designed to help promote the microworld concept.

Students reacted to a question asking them to characterize the climate of the course:

"The climate of the course was fun, interesting, educating, interacting, and positive."

"The people in this class were genuinely concerned about each other. They respected one another as professionals. The morale of the group was high and most obvious after project presentations. Everyone was supportive and complimentary."

"It was a place I wanted to be because my ideas were listened to. The entire group made comments which made me feel good and made me laugh. it was a real life place."

"The class set up conditions for learning and reflection that allowed for these things: morning meetings, humor, sensitivity, freedom, questions...."

"To say the climate was comfortable would be misleading because risk taking is not comfortable. I did, however, feel safe to take risks."

Results From Year One

Nine designs for new concept schools were created by the nine cooperative teams in the course. Many of these course projects exceeded the expectations of the instructors in terms of creativity, innovation, integrity, and effort. School designs included a French language immersion school set in a neighborhood, several community schools that featured senior citizen centers, a high tech school characterized by student directed learning, and several community based middle school. The supporting documentation for some of the projects was voluminous, up to 350 and 400 pages of research documents and journal articles as well as students own notes and arguments.

In addition, students had to take some aspect of their school and develop a

demonstration to the class and invited guests. Some examples of these demonstrations are:

1) a 90 minute student/parent orientation to a French immersion school complete with a hands on mathematics lesson in French, a simulated orientation session, and a reception with French food;

2) a student led parent conference in which the student analyzed his performance for his parents using the Grady Profile, a hyper-card program used in a technological form of portfolio assessment;

3) a video tour of an elementary school that featured interviews with students, senior citizens, parents, and school personnel conveying the school educator's intent to provide programs for parents with new infants as a way of involving them with the school.

Feedback from students provided additional information about outcomes. Students reported feeling energized and engaged by their experiences and many expressed a renewed commitment to bringing about changes in schools. The following are but a few comments that attest to student satisfaction:

"The course was excellent. This was a breakthrough administration class."

"I am so excited about not only the possibilities, but the probabilities of schools in the future (and) hopefully, not in the far distant

future."

"My conceptualization of education has been radically changed. I feel that doors have truly been opened for me."

"I had looked at this course as one I had to take. Once I was in it I was so excited and now, as the last day has arrived, I don't want this communication to end. Plans are being made to bring the class back together many times. I would hope that our group could continue to meet with the instructors. We have become a cohort and it would be neat for that relationship to continue."

"Because this was my first EDAD course, I was somewhat tentative. The instructors have given us so much to think about - about our beliefs and our vision - they helped me form and identify a foundation."

It is unclear that the experience of the course will have a discernible impact on what these educators do in their schools. But it is clear to the instructors that this group of 45 adult learners believe they are different.

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